

PAPERS READ

BEFORE THE

LANCASTER COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NOVEMBER 5, 1909.

"History herself, as seen in her own workshop."

CRESAP'S WAR—THE LANCASTER COUNTY
BORDER STRUGGLE.

MINUTES OF NOVEMBER MEETING.

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CRESAP'S WAR

The Lancaster County Border Struggle.

Cresap's War was simply a series of campaigns beginning in 1735, in a struggle which at that time was about fifty years old—the border struggle between Pennsylvania and Maryland. The difficulty began as early as 1684, and was the chief cause which took Penn back to England that year, where he remained until 1699. Maryland contended that the Susquehanna river was the southwestern boundary of Pennsylvania, and our people insisted that the fortieth degree of north latitude was the southern boundary. Twice temporary lines were agreed upon, and twice the agreement was broken. About 1717 the agreement was reached locating the boundary near where it is to-day, but a few years later it was disregarded. About 1718 Maryland began surveying land near Conestoga, claiming it as Maryland soil (3 C., 37). In 1722 we find Maryland authorities surveying and taking up land fifteen miles above Conestoga (3 C., 160), and the same year an agreement was reached between the Governors of Pennsylvania and Maryland that no land be surveyed within ten miles west of the river (Do. 161). But later in the year a whole colony of Marylanders came and invaded the Susquehanna country (Do. 179). Gov. Keith, of Pennsylvania, then insisted on running the old "mouth of Octorara line" west till it should meet the branches of the Potomac as the boundary (do.). In 1723 the Maryland Governor again threat-

ened to assert the Susquehanna river as the boundary (do., 222). The next year many petitions and complaints were sent in to the Assembly of Pennsylvania that Maryland had renewed the encroachment (2 V., 290). Maryland also used threats to make the Pennsylvanians who lived in the disputed district acknowledge allegiance to Maryland (do.).

In a desultory way the struggle now goes onward five or six years, up to 1730. About that time Cresap appears to have moved up on the Susquehanna river from Baltimore county and settled opposite what is now Washington Borough. About the same time the Germans began going over the Susquehanna and settling. These two were the match and the tinder to the powder.

Maryland began, in 1731, making large surveys just opposite Conestoga over Susquehanna, and the Governor of Pennsylvania protested (1 A., 289), but the Maryland Governor insisted that he was lawfully in that place (do. 292).

Thomas Cresap First Appears.

And now Thomas Cresap first appears in the struggle, though he takes at present no hand in it until about four years later. In certain depositions given by him he says that in October, 1731, he and his man, Chance, at work at the western side of the Blue Rock Ferry, which he owned heard the signal (three gun shots) from the eastern shore for him to bring his flat over, as certain persons wanted to cross. He and his man came over and found there three men belonging to Edmund Cartledge on the shore (one a big negro) and they got on the flat, and when out about seventy yards they attacked Cresap and his man and threw them both into

the water, and tried to kill Cresap, but captured his man, Chance. Cresap finally floated to a rock and an Indian later rescued him. The Lancaster county men then took his flat and servant to the shore and kept them (1 A., 311). He went to Andrew Cornish, a justice of Conestoga, for a warrant for these men, but he says the justice only made sport of him, and told him he could not expect any favors in Lancaster county (do. 313). He also charged that John Cartledge offered a reward to any one who would burn Cresap's house, and drive him and his family south (do., 313). The trouble was that Cresap was keeping a ferry, says the record (1 A., 331), four miles north of the latitude of Philadelphia, and thus at least twenty miles north of the Maryland boundary, and would not take out a license, claiming he had a license from Maryland and claiming that point (Washington Borough latitude) was in Maryland. At this time Cresap was twenty-four years old, but he was a rugged frontiersman (do. 311). Cresap was captured by the Scotch-Irish about this time, the Germans sympathizing with him (do. 317). The Government, too, it seems, disavowed this assault on Cresap, and said the Irish of Lancaster county were acting without authority in harassing him—at least the Assembly said so (do.).

Samuel Blunston in a letter dated 1732 says: "We had given repeated orders to the Dutch to stand on their defense, but, instead, the wives of these Dutch gave notice to the Marylanders how to surprise the Lancaster county authorities and capture some of them" (do.).

Blunston says the measures thus far taken were such as would disburse a mob, but they were not sufficient in

this case, "for these are a set of fellows pretending to act by the authority of another Government, and if our Sheriff should go over with a company of men he might search several days and not find them, and they may be strong enough to overcome him and his men; and besides the Sheriff of Baltimore will assist them. What we want is continual defense (do. 318). It is a question now whether we shall give up that side of the river to them or defend against them," says Blunston. "And if that side were given up, it would seriously affect the inhabitants on this side, where there are already too many malcontents. We need twelve or more rangers to encourage the Dutch to return to their homes. We should root out the nest of villains at Conejohela (Washington Borough) and offer a reward, say, of ten pounds a man for taking the ring leaders and twenty pounds for their captain." He also says "we are obliged to hire people to defend John Wright's house, being the only garrison we have except what is kept by women and children. There has already been a battle in John Wright's wheat field." This may be called the first battle of the "Wheat Field," for there was another in 1735 (1 A., 464). He says our people also aggravated the Marylanders by calling them the "homin' gentry."

Governors Try to Fight it Out.

The Governors on both sides now took the border question in hand and tried to fight it out; but they were as far apart in feeling and sentiment as the people. Practically the whole year of 1733 was spent in negotiations between the two Governors to settle the dispute, but without avail.

But with the beginning of 1734 out-

rages broke out afresh (3 V., 215). Joshua Minshall was taken from his home in Susquehanna and imprisoned in Baltimore (3 C., 542). Hamilton and Goergas were appointed commissioners by Pennsylvania to meet the Governor of Maryland, and they did it, holding several meetings; but they could not reconcile the differences about the boundary line (3 C., 545-568).

Cresap was a carpenter, and in January, 1734, he was to come over to John Hendrix's house, in what is now Washington Borough, and square logs for a house. The Sheriff rushed upon them and seized eight of Cresap's tenants on warrants issued by Wright. They proceeded to cross the river to Cresap's house. He shot through between the logs and wounded one man, and the remainder ran away and left the wounded man (1 A., 411). It turned out that Cresap had ten men besides his family in the house, and his wife could shoot as well as any of them, and declared she hoped the wounded man had been shot in the heart instead of in the legs (do. 412.). Another witness gave this account of the attack on Cresap's house: On January 29, 1734, in the evening, Martin Funk, a German, came to the Blue Rock, in the township of Hempfield, and desired to be ferried over the river to Thos. Cresap's. (It seems a good many Germans allied themselves with Cresap, and he built a dozen tenant houses for them to live in. He held them in fear). The German crossed by John Emerson's ferry, a rival of Cresap's. The witness remained at Cresap's house during the night. Cresap said there was a reward of fifty pounds on Emerson's head and Samuel Bluston's head, and that he meant to get the reward, for they were like the rest of the rogues. Cresap told the witness that

nineteen Lancaster men had been at the upper ferry during the day and captured some of his men, and that if he had been there, there would have been war. While they were talking in Cresap's house, says the witness, about 7 o'clock p. m., they heard the sound of horses coming, and Cresap and the other seven or eight people in the house got their guns to defend the house, and put benches against the door to keep it fast. The invaders from Lancaster county then rushed against the door, but could not open it, and one of them came near the logs and told Cresap he had a warrant for him, but if he would come out he would not be harmed. Cresap told those outside if they came to look between the logs they would see eleven guns pointed at them. One made the experiment, and was promptly shot, the charge going into his leg. Then the door was opened and several rushed in, but Cresap, who had retreated to a little room in the rear, beat them back with his gun and nailed the door shut. Then some one outside asked for a candle to see how to take care of the wounded man, but Mrs. Cresap said that she would not only not give them a candle, but would be glad to wash her hands in the man's heart blood (do 413-14). And thus this effort to capture Cresap failed.

The First Pitched Battle.

The next year, 1735, occurred the first pitched battle in the Cresap War. It was fought near Wrightsville, now stands or near that spot, and was more grotesque than sanguinary. It is described in the depositions of John Wright, taken before the Supreme Court of Pennsylvania, September 24, 1735, Daniel Delaney, Esq., Attorney General of Maryland, being present to

cross-examine. Wright said that he was possessed of a tract of land lying on the west side of the Susquehanna, opposite the plantation where he lived on the east side of said river, about seven miles more northerly than the city of Philadelphia. That about the beginning of July, with a suitable number of men, he went over to harvest his wheat, and was so employed when Cresap, captain of the militia of Maryland, with some twenty persons, men, women and lads, armed with guns, swords, pistols and blunderbusses, with drums beating, came toward the field. The affiant demanded of Cresap what he meant by appearing in so hostile a manner, to the terror of His Majesty's peaceful subjects, employed about the lawful business of husbandry. Cresap answered that he was informed several Pennsylvanians were coming over the river, and he was come to fight them, if they would see fit to engage. At the same time he had a drawn sword in one hand and a cocked pistol in the other, both of which were presented to this affiant's breast, who, as a justice, having commanded the said Cresap and his company to keep His Majesty's peace, at his peril, told them he would keep at his lawful business unless prevented by force. This resolution, says Wright, and this commanding of Cresap to keep the peace had some weight with Cresap's followers, for his soldiers thereafter returned and refused to fight (1 A., 464). Thus a great, bloody battle was avoided.

A month or two later, however, there was a real skirmish on the west bank of the Susquehanna by people of that section upon the Sheriff of Lancaster county and his deputies, who went over the river to serve writs for the collection of certain

debts (3 C., 612). The defendants could not find bail and were arrested for debt. About the time the Sheriff and his deputies were starting to cross the river back to Lancaster county, suddenly about thirty men on horseback, armed with cutlasses and clubs, appeared, and suddenly fell upon the Sheriff in a furious manner, and, having grievously beat and wounded them, rescued the defendants, and the Sheriff and his deputies took to flight. The attack was inspired by Cresap, and based on the belief that all west of the river was Maryland, and that the Lancaster county Sheriff had no power therein.

The next year, 1736, a body of 300 Marylanders was organized and mobilized near the locality of Wrightsville, to meet any force Lancaster county should send out to oppose it. September 11 Robert Barber made the statement on oath before the Mayor of Philadelphia that he was on the preceding Sunday on the west side of the Susquehanna river, where about 300 inhabitants of Maryland, all armed in a hostile manner, under the command of several officers of the militia of Maryland, with beat of drum and sound of trumpet, marched to John Hendrix's house, about six miles north of the latitude of Philadelphia (about a mile below Wrightsville now) and a company of Lancaster county magistrates being at the house of John Wright, Jr. (Wrightsville), asked the commanding officer what this martial array meant. He said they had no orders to treat with any of the magistrates of Lancaster county, but they came by order of the Maryland Governor, and that thirteen companies of the militia were mustered. Some of these same soldiers broke open and robbed many houses and greatly terrified the inhabitants (1 A., 489).

At the same time the Sheriff of Lancaster county got a force of 150 people together to meet the Sheriff of Baltimore county, who was aided by Cresap and a couple hundred Marylanders in battle. The report was afloat that the Sheriff of Baltimore with 200 men, under military officers, on the night of the second Saturday of September, had arrived at Cresap's. On Saturday they appeared on horseback, with beating drum and sound of trumpet at John Wright's. A conference was fixed for the next day, but during Sunday night the Baltimore troops suddenly left. Nothing apparently came of this, and the Lancaster county troops disbanded (4 C., 63-4). But the Sheriff of Lancaster county was ordered to get a large force ready to meet any emergency (do. 66).

A Letter to the Younger Penn.

Concerning these events of 1736, Samuel Blunston wrote the following letter to the Proprietor, the younger Penn, which has never been published, but remains among the manuscripts in the Pennsylvania Historical Society at Philadelphia, as follows:

"September ye 8th, 1736.

"May It Please the Proprietor:

"Not knowing when this comes to hand, whether thou may have seen a letter wrote yesterday morning to the President and Council giving an account of the Maryland invasion, I shall relate it in order from the beginning.

"While I was in Philadelphia, as thou heard, the Marylanders were expected up and accordingly the Dutch on the other side (of the river) and a considerable number from this side met at John Wright Junr's, and stayed together three days till they heard a party who were come up near half

way on the Barrens, had been remanded back by the Governor, and they were just separating as I got home. But by being informed they had further intentions against us, I procured a man to ride down on this side and cross the river at Williams' Ferry, and go from there to their musterfield near Nathaniel Rigby's, at Deer Creek, where being taken up for a spy, as he really was, and kept with them all day while they mustered, he learned their whole design, of coming up with a select army of men, drawn out of every company in the county to the number of about 300, including the officers, who had been nine days in gathering, and were to march in two days for our Province.

"Upon this news, we expected their coming until Saturday last, when he heard they arrived at Cresap's in the evening, and on Sunday about noon they came to John Hendrix's marching with beat of drum and sound of trumpet. We had then at John Wright's of our own people about 40 men. Provision was made for the Marylanders at Hendricks, where they dined, and in the afternoon several of the officers came, four several times, desiring to speak with the Dutch, or that they might be delivered to them. But as none of the Magistrates were then over except Edward Smout, nor the Sheriff nor any people from Donegal yet come we had not taken council what was proper to be done, further than to defend the house and keep the Dutch out of their sight.

"Toward evening on Sunday a considerable company of people, to the number of 100 or upwards came from Donegal and Lancaster, and on our going over about sunset with two flat loads, at once the army, when we were half way over the river, beat to

arms and precipitately leaving their dinner mounted and marched as we supposed, with intent to oppose our landing; but instead they filed off and returned that night to Cresap's.

"Before the going over of the people from this side the Sheriff had agreed to meet us and the Dutch there the next morning, Monday, at ten o'clock; but when they went away they left word they might come to them on Monday to Cresap's, when their army marched off. Colonel Edward Hall came to our company and was there when we went over, so we drew up a short paper which three of the Dutch signed, requesting they would commit their demands to writing, and the letter was sent by Hall, but they returned no answer.

"On Monday our Sheriff sent the Sheriff of Baltimore an order to depart to which he returned a threatening answer, and in the afternoon marched to Barnett Weymor's where they lodged, and sent a message to Michael Tanner by his wife that they desired to see him. And upon his writing for the passport for himself and two of our people who might come out, when they sent one for him but refused the others.

"On Monday morning they marched Eastward toward Codorus and when they were got four five miles distance from us they divided into two companies and went to plundering houses, getting in at the windows or getting in and breaking open the doors; and took with them several pieces of linen cloth for public dues as they pretended; and the party in which Cresap was threatened the women to burn the houses but they did not.

"While they were at this work Michael Tanner overtook them about six miles from the river and having re-

ceived instructions how to act he had a pretty long conversation with their Sheriff and chief officers telling them the reason of their (the Germans') revolt and inveighing Cresap's ill behavior; and that they had rather quit their places than suffer such treatment (under Maryland). The Sheriff and officers spoke to him very fair and endeavored to persuade him to go down to the Governor or at least to write, both of which he refused. They told him if the Dutch would return to their duty they should have better treatment, for their failure their taxes this year should be remitted and they should not be levied again until they were better able to pay. He desired 'em to commit to writing what terms they had to offer, but they answered they had only the word on honor from the Governor and would promise on their own honor to perform what they promised. He then told them most of his countrymen were gone over the river (East) so that he could give no immediate answer but that he would make their proposal known to them and return an answer in two weeks. Upon which they returned to him the goods they had taken and promised no more who had signed the paper should receive any damage during that time. But if they did not return the Governor would come up with a much greater force and would totally dispossess them and put in their places such lusty young men as would be true to him and keep possession; whom he would bring up with him for that purpose. And upon them consenting the company parted. The Sheriff and part of the men went toward Codorus and Conewago in their return to Patapsco and the other part returned to Cresap's from whence we suppose they went this

morning toward their respective homes. Thus the affair for the present ended and our people sufficiently tired out waiting returned to their business.

"Had our Sheriff and his men been well armed I make no doubt but that they would have given a total rout to their whole army, but as they were almost destitute of arms could only stand on the defense, and prevented them from doing any other harm except march and counter-march, pillage a few houses and talk with a Dutchman (Michael Tanner), though we were well informed they intended much greater matters when they came up. It also gained the revolters time that they and the Council might be acquainted with it, and take such future measures as you think proper which it is absolutely necessary should be agreed on and time enough for them to send their answer.

"The poor people are mightily desirous to live under this Government; and some of them will rather quit their possessions than return to their former slavery. The Governor of Maryland has it much at heart to bring all on that side into subjection and if that is once obtained I dare venture to say his pretense won't be bounded even by this river.

"If no more defense is to be made it may be well to let them know soon that every man may provide for himself, but if more just and vigorous measures are to be taken, time provisions should be made for defense.

"I hope to see the proprietor here by this day a week. I am too much fatigued with the resolution already taken. I have procured Robert Barber to go down with this letter to the President, he having the required Dispatch. He was the whole time on the spot and

can give thee or the Council a more full account of the whole affair.

The Proprietor's Spared Friend,

"SA. BLUNSTON.

"P. S. There has been a considerable quantity of rum used on this occasion, which was mostly borrowed to save expense; and it would be cheaper to send up a cask to pay it back again than to pay it here in money."

The paper, which "three Dutchmen signed." is found in Vol. 4 of the Col. Rec., p. 67, in which Michael Tanner, Henry Liphart and Christian Crawl state they desire the Marylanders to commit in writing what they wish to demand of these Germans living west of the Susquehanna, so that it can be more carefully considered. And on page 125, of the same book, the whole controversy is reviewed in a petition sent by the Governor and Council of Pennsylvania to the King. This latter petition sets forth, among other things, that for a long time there was a warrant out to take Cresap on the charge of murder, and that the Sheriff, attended by a lot of German Protestants and Europeans, lately arrived, of the Communion of the Church of England and Scotland, went over to capture Cresap and set fire to his house in doing so, but that there was bloodshed in the undertaking.

Joseph Ross' Narration.

Another very elaborate narration concerning the whole trouble is the deposition of John Ross, of Lancaster county in 1736 (1 A., 526). This described the same events which are detailed in Blunston's letter. Ross, however, says, in addition, that a large number of Lancaster county people crossed the river in three flats, and when about landing on the western side the militia of Maryland, who

were there, beat their drums and prepared to make a stand, but after firing their blunderbusses they retreated toward the house of Thomas Cresap.

The man Daunt, whom Cresap shot by firing between the logs of his house, died, and it was determined to arrest Cresap for murder (4 C., 109). The following account of the arrest is given: The Sheriff and twenty-four deputies, November 23, 1736, went to Cresap's house and early the next morning surrounded the place and called on him to surrender. But he and the men with him began a furious firing, so that the Sheriff could not storm the house without hazard, there being nearly 100 firearms in it. He tried to get some who were in the house with Cresap to desert him, but they had all taken on oath to kill any one who offered to surrender. One, however, found means to desert by getting out by the chimney. At dusk the Sheriff's party set fire to the house and offered to quench it if Cresap would surrender, but he would not do so; nor would he allow his wife and children to leave the house, but fired at those who proposed it. When the floor was ready to fall in (that is, the ceiling) he and those with him rushed forth, loaded with arms, which they fired at the Sheriff and then threw them away. Cresap was finally captured, and when he was taken he declared that he had intended to kill his wife and children or that they should be burnt in the fire rather than be captured (4 C., 109, 7-10).

While Cresap was in jail a free-booter named Higginbotham took his place at the head of the Marylanders and he began to intimidate and drive the Germans who settled over the river Susquehanna back to the eastern side, etc. (4 C., 150). He broke into their houses with axes, wounded

and carried them away prisoners, and drove the women and children forth in the month of January into the woods.

Early in 1737, therefore, the Council of Pennsylvania sent orders to the Sheriff of Lancaster county to raise a sufficient number of men of the county at such points on the west side of the Susquehanna, under proper officers, as should prevent further disorders. The border warfare along the Susquehanna river was so serious and so ruinous to the inhabitants, and especially to the Germans who had taken allegiance to both provinces, in their despair, that Council sent two commissioners to the seat of war, who held a conference with all the Lancaster county justices and perfected a plan of watching the frontier.

Horror of Border Warfare.

The horror of the Lancaster county border warfare is shown by the cruel treatment inflicted upon the Germans whom Higginbotham, as lieutenant for the imprisoned Cresap, captured and took to the Baltimore jail. The Council of Pennsylvania, in a letter dated March 5, 1737, addressed to the Governor of Maryland (4 C. 159), among other things, said: "What must the world judge or yourself say of the last transactions begun and since continued by your new Captain Higginbotham and his crew.....the seizing and taking at one time half a dozen quiet and peaceable men from the humane office of digging a grave to bury the dead of a neighbor's family, hurrying them through the woods in the most rigorous, cold season that has been for some years known, about 100 miles on foot and then committing them in like weather to a narrow, noisome jail without any other subsistence than a pint of Indian corn

boiled in water, for the whole 24 hours, for which pint, of the value of half a penny, each man is charged by the Sheriff 20 pounds of tobacco, for each day, and no fire or any other lodging than the bare floor. Your captain and his gang breaking down the windows, fired in upon the family at one man's house, then breaking up both doors, beat him and his wife with their guns till they broke two on them and then took the man; another they took from his threshing floor, and being at the work thinly clad, his wife following him to carry his coat to him, they fired at the woman and obliged her to return; they cut down the doors of two other houses and took the men; and at another the man who fled upon horseback to escape they fired two shots, etc." We can hardly imagine that such cruelties of a petty war existed here in our county, but they did.

Cresap, the Ringleader, in Jail.

Meanwhile Cresap, the ringleader, lay in the jail at Philadelphia during most of the year 1737, and his associates were in Lancaster jail, when Wednesday, October 26, at midnight, John Charlton, captain of the Maryland garrison, with sixteen men, armed with guns, pistols, cutlasses, etc., broke into the keeper's part of the jail, pulled the keeper and his wife out of bed and presented cocked pistols to their breasts, demanded the keys of the jail, that the doors might be set open, which was done, and the Maryland prisoners let out (4 C. 251 and 2).

Cresap was again taken after renewing the border warfare, but before he was tried the King of England sent a command to the Governors of both Pennsylvania and Maryland which was brought before the Council, January 3, 1738, requiring both governments to

desist from further war upon each other; and to be responsible for any hurt or damage done by each to the other, or the people thereof (4 C. 264), and that all prisoners taken on either side should be released from prison and enlarged. The result was that Cresap, whose petition was lying before Council to be released on bail, was granted that liberty, and there is no record of whatever became of his case.

Thus ended the long boundary struggle, which lasted during at least half a century, and did more than any one other thing to keep Penn away from his province during a large part of the first ten years of his government here; and also kept infant Lancaster county during four years of suffering, hardship and terror in the throes of Cresap's War.

